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War & Heroin—an Expensive Habit

THE POLITICS OF HEROIN IN SOUTHEAST ASIA. *By Alfred W. McCoy, with Cathleen B. Read and Leonard P. Adams II. Harper & Row. 464 pp. $10.95.*

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Most Americans used to think that the costs of an interventionist foreign policy were low. For relatively small expenditures of foreign aid money, arms, or occasionally the presence of American troops, one could build bastions of the Free World all around the globe. Anti-Communist governments in the underdeveloped countries could be supported or created, and anti-Communist politicians subsidized. Indeed, as in the Shan states of Burma or the Indonesian islands, separatist forces could be encouraged—if the ruling government could not be overthrown, or at least persuaded to move in desired directions. Some of these efforts might also bring enlightened governments and policies to the countries in question. Others would succeed at the cost of strengthening or imposing corrupt, oligarchic, reactionary governments. Many others would fail, at the cost of death and misery for the peoples who lived in those distant countries. But the costs to the United States would be minimal, easily tolerated by the world's richest power. And those small costs to us seemed far preferable to living in a world of Communist or neutralist-nationalist states.

Our innocence about the costs of an interventionist foreign policy has been lost in the wake of Indochina. Even if we could (as many still would) ignore the costs of our war to the wretched peoples of that area, we now have felt some substantial costs to ourselves. Fifty-six thousand young Americans dead, $200 billion spent, an economy and foreign trade balance badly out of kilter, intense strains on our domestic, social and political system—these we now recognize as part of the price we pay. In this new book Alfred McCoy and his associates show us another cost, very possibly the grimmest of all, resulting from our addiction to interventionism: the heroin plague.

Drug addiction has of course been a curse of men for many centuries, and the United States has had thousands of heroin addicts since about sixty years ago. Neither the CIA nor Dean Rusk nor Henry Kissinger invented heroin addiction. But every designer, executor, or enthusiast for an interventionist foreign policy (and that includes me and probably you in our less-enlightened days) contributed by failing to know or to care much about the more subtle consequences of that policy.

As McCoy points out, there were around 20,000 addicts in the United States in 1946; the best estimates are that the figures then grew to about 57,000 in 1965, 315,000 in 1969, and 560,000 in 1971. The avalanche of addiction was made possible by an evil combination of supply and demand. Demand means the ability of American drug consumers to pay high prices, social conditions feeding the desire for an escape, and the enthusiasm of pushers prepared to distribute free samples generously. Under such circumstances the market will grow as fast as supply will permit. The supply comes from abroad: formerly from Turkey and Iran, now largely from Southeast Asia—60 to 70 per cent of the world's illicit opium from the "Golden Triangle" of Burma, Laos and Thailand. It is grown by peasants, shipped to the United States and distributed by Corsican and Mafia underworld gangs, and moved from the peasants to the gangs with the assistance of such friendly Freedom Fighters as Gen. Phoumi Nosavan of Laos, and Ngo Dinh Diem and Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky of South Vietnam. After enormous and carefully documented exposition McCoy finds that the United States:

> . . . has acquired enormous power in the region. And it has used this power to create new nations where none existed, handpick prime ministers, topple governments, and crush revolutions. But U.S. officials in Southeast Asia have always tended to consider the opium traffic a quaint local custom and have generally turned a blind eye to official involvement. . . . However, American involvement has gone far beyond coincidental complicity; embassies have covered up involvement by client governments, CIA contract airlines have carried opium, and individual CIA agents have winked at the opium traffic.

This important book should not be interpreted as a piece of yellow journalism or as an exposé of scandals in the CIA. It details none of the classic sort of corruption for personal enrichment on the part of CIA men or of any other U.S. Government officials (though there is plenty on the part of the locals). The corruption is of a more subtle sort, stemming from the enthusiasm of "good" men for doing a good job. The job was defined as halting communism; the choice of means or of allies was not so important. One worked with the tools available. If this meant Corsican gangs [illegible] opium runners and their accomplices in Southeast Asia, that was just the way it had to be. In any case, it usually seemed to be the citizens of the countries far away, not Americans, who paid the price of such alliances. Until 1970, for instance, opium grown in the Golden Triangle stayed almost entirely in Southeast Asia for Southeast Asians. Only in that spring did the great flood of heroin to GIs in Vietnam begin, and only later still did it start to flow directly to the United States. And it was not until that time that senior officials in the U.S. Government decided that the Southeast Asian heroin trade should be suppressed.

McCoy and his colleagues show us, convincingly, that the heroin trade grew with the acquiescence and sometimes with the assistance of men in our government. Without our government's history of single-minded anti-communism, and of meddling in the politics of foreign lands, our government and our people would now have a heroin problem of much smaller proportions. Official American complicity in the drug trade has to stop. No matter how much some cold-warrior leaders may like the foreign policy of a particular foreign government, if that government is condoning heroin traffic, American military and economic aid should be withdrawn. The

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